

Part I: The UN and the International Community

During World War II, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led an effort to create an organization that would bring countries together in a new system of international cooperation. On June 25, 1945, fifty countries signed a document known as the United Nations Charter. According to the Charter, the central aim of the United Nations is to “maintain international peace and security.” The Charter discusses issues of human health and well-being as well as safety from violence as key matters of security.

Roosevelt was not the first U.S. president to propose a system of international cooperation. Having seen Europe devastated by the violence of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson entered the war in hopes that it would be “the war to end all wars.” In addition to committing troops, Wilson outlined a proposal for an organization of states he called the League of Nations. His proposal led statesmen from around the world to give real thought to the idea of organizing the international community.

What is the international community?

Both Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s visions for a world organization were founded on a concept of an “international community.” Each foresaw an organization run by representatives from governments around the world. By the twentieth century, the world’s population had come to be organized under various governments. These governments, also known as states, oversaw distinct geographic regions. International law gave states supreme authority, or

sovereignty, over all those living within the boundaries of that territory.

At times of widespread international conflict, like the two world wars, it became clear that the system of state sovereignty alone could not prevent war. The world faced the question of who ought to govern the interactions between sovereign states. The international community had established the United Nations, and the League of Nations before it, as international bodies of authority. Both organizations faced the challenge of balancing their authority with the participating states’ sovereignty.

Statesmen founded the United Nations and the League of Nations with the belief that respecting state sovereignty would promote international order. In addition, they hoped that international cooperation could address hunger, deprivation, poverty, racism, exploitation, slavery, and disease.

How did the League of Nations intend to serve as the “conscience of the world?”

Nine months before the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson proposed a plan to end the fighting and prevent future conflict. Wilson suggested the creation of a new international system. The new international organization would eliminate secret treaties and the causes of war through open diplomacy, securing freedom of the seas, developing free trade, and reducing the production and trade in arms. He called this permanent global organization

What is the difference between a nation and a state?

The 192 official members of the United Nations are not actually nations, but states. A nation is a group of people who are united by a common language, religion, history, or homeland. A state is a system of government that presides over a defined geographic area. States may contain one or more nations within their boundaries, and nations within a state may or may not feel that their state accurately represents them as a group. Many nations within states rally behind the cause of “self-determination” claiming that they, and not the states claiming to represent them, should govern their affairs.

the League of Nations. Wilson believed that if states held one another accountable for preserving peace, each would behave more conscientiously in its international relations. In this way, Wilson hoped the League of Nations would serve as the “conscience of the world.”

In a document known as the League of Nations Covenant, Wilson and other world leaders outlined the principles of the proposed organization. A central feature of the Covenant was the idea of “collective security.”

Collective security was based on a member’s promise “to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.” It urged states to respond to an attack on any League member as though it were on attack on itself.

Many Americans bristled at the idea of collective security. Critics of the League of Nations said signing would obligate American troops to fight in conflicts abroad. They worried that joining the League would threaten the sovereignty of the United States. Furthermore, Wilson’s conflicts with congressional leaders hampered any possibilities for compromise. Wilson, a Democrat, did not include Republicans in the drafting of the League of Nations Covenant. In response to this snub, his opponents in the Senate were sceptical of his ideas before they even reached the table. In 1920, the United States Senate defied Wilson and rejected U.S. participation in the League.

Why did the League of Nations fail?

The organization began to fail after the League of Nations treaty took effect in January 1920. The League lacked an effective mechanism for enforcement and did not have the power to compel sovereign states to respect

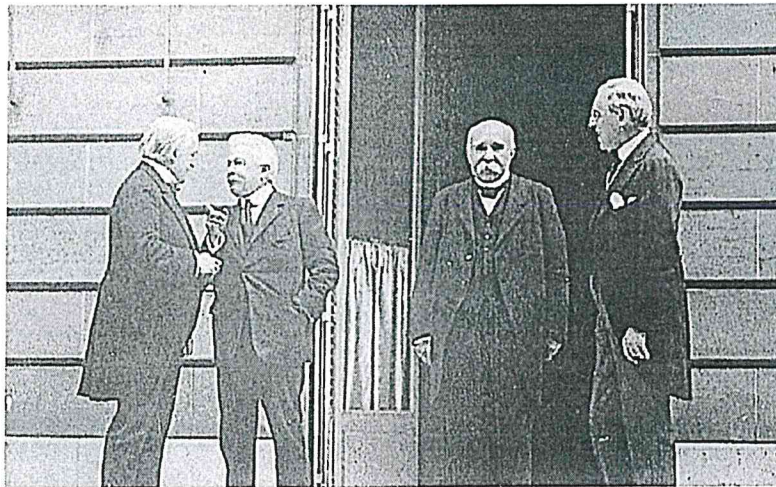


Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

The Big Four—Prime Minister Lloyd George of Britain, Prime Minister Orlando of Italy, Premier Clemenceau of France, and U.S. President Wilson—played leading roles in the creation of the League of Nations.

its authority. Members had little incentive to honor their pledges of cooperating to stop aggression, protect human rights, and limit the production and spread of armaments. Also, the League required unanimous decisions, which slowed processes and prevented productive action. Differences of opinion prevented the League from acting in many cases.

The League struggled to live up to its promise of being a global organization. Because the covenant’s authors were enemies of Germany during World War I, the covenant reflected anti-German sentiments. Britain and France saw to it that Germany, and a number of other important countries like the Soviet Union, were excluded from League membership. Their exclusion, along with the fact that the United States never joined the organization, diminished the League’s credibility as an international entity.

“[The] League was considered a European and not a world organization.”

—Lord Grey, British Foreign Minister

The UN Takes Shape

As World War II erupted, the League of Nations’ goal of preventing another world

conflict had clearly failed. Not only did the death toll of World War II surpass that of World War I, but the fighting caused unparalleled destruction. World War II also alerted the international community to the human capability for mass execution of civilians on an unprecedented scale, known as genocide. While it was clear that the League of Nations had failed, the search for a lasting solution to conflict had never been more urgent.

What conditions made another international organization possible?

Following World War II, the U.S. public's attitude towards international collaboration was more favorable. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entrance into World War II, Americans began to see themselves both as vulnerable and as connected to other countries.

President Franklin Roosevelt, though he had denounced the League of Nations in 1932, took the lead in creating the new international institution. Recalling Wilson's inability to get the League passed in Congress, Roosevelt resolved not to bring the United Nations Charter to the Congress for approval until he knew he had the votes to guarantee ratification.

Roosevelt was not the only one to see new value in cooperating with governments internationally. The League had also alerted the public's attention to world issues and made international organization seem necessary to preventing future conflicts. Still, the League's record of failure and its reputation as a tool of Britain and France made people wary. The United States, in particular, could not overcome its suspicions about the League and demanded the formation of a new organization.

“If it [the League] were to disappear today, nearly every treaty of a political character which has been concluded during these thirteen years would vanish with it... A state of chaos would result...the first task which would confront the statesmen on the League's disappearance would be to reinvent the League.”

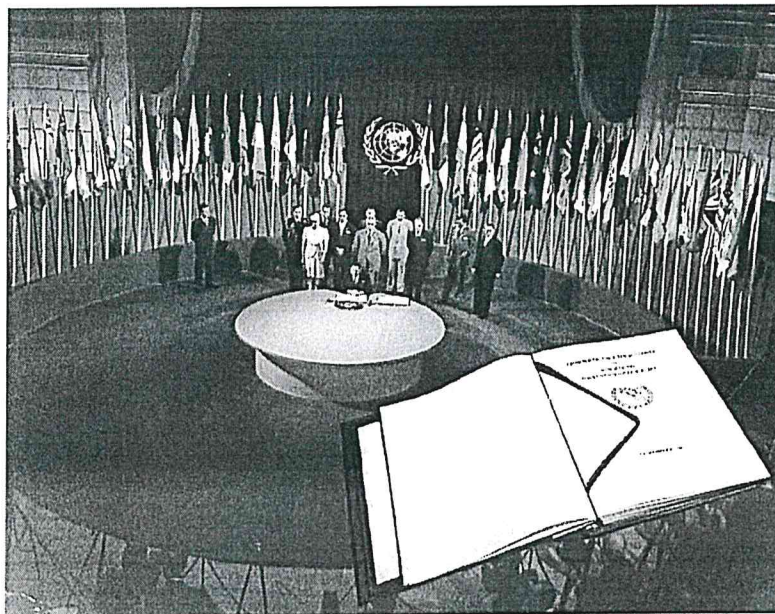
–League Secretary-General Eric Drummond

Even when statesmen recognized the League's ineffectiveness and resolved to abandon it, they did not do so until they had a formal plan to replace it.

How was the UN established?

Of the fifty states to sign the United Nations' founding document, the Charter, only a handful played a role in its drafting. Discussions of the new organization's design and purpose began four years earlier in 1940. Initially, the four main players were the wartime allies Britain, China, the USSR, and the United States.

Three weeks before the Germans surrendered, bringing the European war to an



Egypt signs the UN Charter, June 6, 1945, San Francisco.

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Choosing a Headquarters

The decision to house the UN headquarters in New York City marked a new phase in the history of the international community. Prior to the two world wars, Europe was seen as the center of international politics.

World War I and World War II called European stability into question. After World War II, the United States emerged as a strong and stable player in the international arena. Switzerland, though it had housed the League of Nations, had concerns about hosting the United Nations. Its priority after the Second World War was to maintain neutrality. (In fact, Switzerland did not join the UN until 2002.) Indeed, the failure of the League of Nations had tainted all of Europe as a site for the new international organization.

Many in the world believed that placing the headquarters of the United Nations in the United States would help engage Americans in world politics. The technological capabilities, democratic media and available facilities in the United States made it a practical choice as well. Americans saw hosting the UN headquarters as a step towards spreading American values and pursuing American interests around the world. In a vote of 30 to 14, the UN decided to place its headquarters in the United States. Cities like Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia and New York vied for the honor. New York City was chosen as the temporary site. U.S. oil businessman John D. Rockefeller offered the UN \$8.5 million in order to purchase a specific piece of property in New York City. The deal was settled, and the United Nations set up headquarters in New York City in early 1946.

end, President Roosevelt died. His successor, Harry S Truman, assured the world that the conference to establish the UN would go on as planned. Fifty countries gathered in San Francisco to approve the Charter and the United States paid for the event—\$2 million. They adopted the Charter on June 25, 1945.

The Charter gave the five major victors of World War II—Britain, China, the USSR, the United States, and France—permanent positions on the UN Security Council. The League transferred its powers to the United Nations, and the League of Nations ceased to exist.

Fundamental Principles of the UN Charter

In the nearly sixty years of its existence, the UN Charter has undergone few changes. As the first international treaty of its scale, the Charter is one of the most important documents in international relations. There are, however, a number of statements in the Charter that lend themselves to multiple interpretations and dispute.

What values does the Charter prioritize?

Sovereignty: The first underlying principle of the United Nations Charter is the sovereignty of all Member States. Sovereignty means the absolute authority of the state to govern itself without outside interference. Governments support the UN on the condition that their right to govern themselves will be respected. The Charter, however, gives the permanent members of the Security Council authoritative power over others.

Self-determination: Self-determination is the right of a people to choose their own government. The cause of self-determination has inspired small nations to challenge empires who rule them. World leaders have often viewed self-determination struggles as a threat to peace and stability. With thousands of ethnic groups in the world, fully honoring the principle of self-determination could lead to the creation of thousands of countries.

Territorial Integrity: Territorial integrity is the idea that international boundaries should not forcibly be changed. The United Nations is committed to upholding the sanctity of boundaries. When disputes arise over where rightful

borders lie, this commitment to territorial integrity can conflict with both the principles of state sovereignty and self-determination.

The Structure of the UN

The United Nations is a vast network spanning the globe and employing more than fifty thousand people. The organization is divided into sections known as “organs.” There are six principal Organs of the UN: the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Secretariat, the International Court of Justice, the Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council. The Charter gives only the Security Council the legal means to enforce its decisions through diplomatic or military action.

Who sits on the Security Council?

The UN’s executive body, the Security Council, holds the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. The Security Council has fifteen seats. Ten of the seats are for elected states. Elections are held for five seats every two years. Terms are for four years. Current practice allocates five elected seats to African or Asian states, two to Latin American states, one to an Eastern European state and two to Western European states.

The five remaining seats belong to the

permanent members—the United States, Britain, France, China, and Russia. Each of the five permanent members has the right to veto Security Council decisions. In order for a resolution to pass, nine of the fifteen members on the Security Council must vote in its favor, and no permanent member can use the veto. All UN members are legally required to abide by resolutions of the Security Council.

What impact has the “veto power” had on UN activities?

As was the case with the League of Nations Covenant, the five major powers worried that their countries might be obligated to intervene in conflicts that neither concerned nor interested their states. They also worried that the UN would intervene in their own country. Knowing that their governments would bear the largest responsibility for funding UN activities, the five permanent members granted themselves the power to veto resolutions as a way of ensuring themselves the final say in UN Security Council resolutions.

From the very beginning, many states worried about the fairness of the veto power. They worried that disagreements between the permanent members of the Security Council could create stalemates. The UN’s creators hoped that the permanent members of the

The Organs of the United Nations

The Security Council: The Security Council is the UN body responsible for peace and security. It is the most powerful of the six organs.

The General Assembly: The General Assembly is composed of representatives from every UN member state. Votes in the General Assembly carry moral weight, but are not binding.

The International Court of Justice: (ICJ): The ICJ is the judicial organ of the United Nations. Cases come before the ICJ only when all parties (states, not individuals) involved agree to appear in court.

The Secretariat: The Secretariat carries out the decisions of the organs of the UN and is the administrative section of the UN. The Secretary General is the head of the Secretariat.

The Economic and Social Council: The Economic and Social Council coordinates the work of the UN specialized agencies, functional committees, and regional commissions that do much of the United Nations’ work.

The Trusteeship Council: The Trusteeship Council oversaw the transition of colonies to self-government or independence. This organ ceased operations on November 1, 1994.

Security Council would share a common interest in maintaining global peace. The permanent members vowed not to obstruct operations of the Council with their veto power. Though many states were dissatisfied with the promise, they understood that the support of every powerful country was essential for the organization to succeed where the League of Nations had failed.



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“The Proposals have many serious flaws, and they all add up to this: the plain reliance on Big-Power agreement is so desperate that no peaceful alternative is envisaged.”

—Time Magazine, 1944

The concerns over the veto power quickly proved valid. Following World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union became involved in a long drawn-out conflict that caused half a century of non-cooperation between these two states and their allies. This conflict, known as the Cold War, limited the Security Council’s ability to act. The Security Council passed an average of fifteen resolutions a year during the Cold War. Today the Security Council passes one resolution per week.

What was the role of the UN during the Cold War?

The Cold War limited the effectiveness of the UN. Nevertheless, during this period three important developments took place. First, the UN invented peacekeeping operations and began its first operation in 1948. During the Cold War there were eighteen peacekeeping operations. Second, developing nations of the world discovered that the UN forum was a good place to voice their concerns. Finally, the UN became an international leader on issues

GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

of development, human rights, and the environment.

How did the end of the Cold War affect relations in the UN?

The end of the Cold War was like a rebirth of the UN. By 1990 the international community realized that the UN had changed dramatically. UN membership had nearly quadrupled since the charter was signed. Cooperation among the permanent members grew, but demands on the UN were greater than ever and the changing nature of global concerns required the Security Council to consider the reach of its authority.

The question of how to confront global concerns has ignited discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of a global organization. In one respect, a global organization such as the UN is uniquely positioned to address these concerns.

At the same time, action often requires states to relinquish some of their sovereignty. As a result, contentious questions often arise about when and how the UN should act. The next section will discuss the UN’s work on leading concerns of the day and consider several of the debates surrounding it.

The Structure of the United Nations

